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SUBJECT: ISTANBUL,S UNPLANNED GROWTH ENHANCES VULNERABILITY  
TO NATURAL DISASTERS

REF: ISTANBUL 344

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: The uncontrolled sprawling growth of the city of Istanbul puts its citizens at great risk in the event of a natural disaster. Construction standards have improved since the 1999 Marmara earthquake that killed over 30,000 people, yet illegal housing that lacks these standards comprises the lion's share of new structures. The city also lacks an urban plan that brings together relevant agencies to manage future growth. Finally, Turkish society's hierarchical orientation leads people to look to the government for help during a crisis, but, as a local expert counters, educating people to prepare for and respond to a disaster will save more lives.

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Istanbul - The Unplanned Metropolis  
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¶2. (SBU) Natural disasters, such as the 1999 Marmara earthquake that killed over 30,000 people and last month's deadly floods (reftel), show limitations in the city's preparation and response to these events. The main culprit in both these tragedies according to many academics is the large amount of illegal construction (&gecekondos in Turkish) that sprouted over the past three decades as the city went from a population of less than 3 million to an official population of 12.5 million. Many academics put this at least a million higher.

¶3. (SBU) According to Mahmut Bas, the Director for the Municipality's Disaster and Ground Analysis Directorate, construction standards have improved tremendously since the 1999 earthquake, yet he admitted much of the new housing in Istanbul was illegally built and bypassed any regulation. (NOTE: Government statistics state 60 percent of Istanbul's housing is illegally built. END NOTE). Moreover, most of the buildings constructed before 1999 have not been retrofitted to meet current standards. Bas told us the city is planning to replace or retrofit these buildings, but most of this sub-standard construction still exists. The city has updated many of its municipal buildings, although Bas noted many of the hospitals still do not meet sufficient earthquake standards. Furthermore, it is the non-municipal buildings that have the greatest need, yet it is difficult for the city to fit these private structures. The Municipality has condemned some sub-standard buildings as structurally

incapable to survive a serious earthquake. Bas did concede to us that these actions are a drop in the bucket compared to the amount of illegal housing being built every day.

14. (SBU) Another problem is that Istanbul lacks a real Urban Plan that brings together relevant agencies (transportation, fire services, housing) to plan future growth. Bas did tell us his office developed an earthquake disaster plan for the city, which was by three respected Istanbul Universities. (NOTE: An English version of this detailed document can be found at the Istanbul Municipality's Earthquake and Ground Analysis web site. END NOTE) Bas however, told us other city departments, such as fire, police and transportation agencies did not provide input into this earthquake plan. (COMMENT: Leaving out these critical agencies from this document seriously degrades the utility of this well-intentioned work. It appears this massive plan is only an academic exercise that will have no impact on future developments. END COMMENT).

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In Case of Disaster: Call the City  
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15. (SBU) Mikdat Kadioglu, Disaster Preparedness Expert and former consultant to the city told us Istanbul unfortunately takes an extremely hierarchical response to disasters. Instead of distributing earthquake preparedness information to all citizens of Istanbul, the municipality chooses to direct its resources to a centralized disaster center (AKOM) and a specialized response team. Kadioglu laments that this is the traditional way Turks response to problems, for they look to the government to act. And the government responds with &heroic men doing heroic things8 in high profile

vehicles or helicopters. However, more lives can be saved, or lost, during the first minutes of an earthquake long before the rescue teams arrive.

16. (SBU) Kadioglu said the government should provide citizens information on how to make their homes safe during an earthquake and steps to take in the event of a disaster. Every community should have trained volunteers ready to provide their neighbors with medical and other assistance. However, Kadioglu told us this is not how Turks do things, and it will take education to change this outlook. Kadioglu -- who has worked with U.S., Japanese, and other earthquake experts -- has tried to communicate what he has learned to the city, but he recently resigned in disgust over their failure to move away from the traditional hierarchical approach to disaster preparedness. To make matters worse, according to Kadioglu, city leaders often shun their responsibilities by claiming these deaths were caused by an act of God. He said earthquake and floods are acts of God, but people are killed when leaders failed to prepare its citizens for these events.

17. (SBU) Comment: The urban development of Istanbul is not planned, arising out of a the lack of political will to block and remove illegal construction and the failure of municipal elements to come together and develop a comprehensive city plan. This is to the detriment of the citizens of Istanbul during their daily lives, but it turns deadly when a disaster strikes. Furthermore, the municipality's centralized emergency response plan is woefully unrealistic. In typical Istanbul traffic, it can takes hours to reach some parts of the city. During a major crisis, it could likely take days for the city to respond to all the citizens (and Istanbul tourists and visitors) in need ) a potential issue for participants in any future international disaster relief response. Kadioglu's desire to have trained neighbors respond appears to the better option. Having these volunteers respond to the site of a disaster in minutes will save more lives than the municipality's &heroic men8 who arrive on the scene hours later or international relief response teams in the following days.

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